

October 2, 2008

From: Construction Industries of Rhode Island
545 words

Contact

Hugh Ryan
Ryan Wellnitz & Associates
Barrington, Rhode Island
(401) 246-2300

hryan@ryanwellnitz.com
www.rhodework.com

'Approve' Referendum 1 for the Highways, Roads and Bridges We Need

The national and international challenges before the United States, along with the precedent-shattering Presidential and Vice Presidential candidates, are generating tremendous interest among American voters. For Rhode Islanders, it will be crucial that, in all the excitement, we not overlook Referendum 1 on the November 4 ballot.

Referendum 1 seeks voter approval of \$87,215,000 in general-obligation, state bonds to fund highways, roads and bridges; commuter rail; and Rhode Island Public Transit Authority (RIPTA) buses. If approved, the bonds will generate the funds necessary to enable the state to receive \$436,075,000 in federal matching funds over two years that otherwise would flow to other states. This \$523,290,000 total funding – \$480,000,000 for highways, roads and bridges – is the only viable way at present to afford the transportation infrastructure needed to support our economy and provide safe, efficient driving.

Michael Lewis, Rhode Island Director of Transportation, says it will take \$100 million to replace the I-95 Pawtucket River Bridge. The Sakonnet River Bridge in Tiverton is another high priority. The 18-ton weight limit on this bridge is impeding tourist buses from serving Newport, threatening 90 to 95 percent of the mansions' operating budget, says the Preservation Society of Newport County.

A partial list of other key projects would include the Great Island Bridge in Narragansett, Route 138 rehabilitation in South Kingstown, the Apponaug Bypass-Circulator in West Warwick, I-95 Providence Viaduct Bridge

(downtown), Warren River Bridge, and East Main Road improvements in Middletown.

This situation is a subset of a national problem. In 2005, the American Society of Civil Engineers estimated that \$1.6 trillion would be needed over five years just to bring existing transportation infrastructure to standards. This estimate included no money for new construction. The American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials says that 25 percent of the nation's 600,000 bridges need modernization or repair, with a projected cost of \$140 billion.

Why are our state's and our nation's roads and bridges in such disrepair? Age is one factor. Much of our interstate system and other infrastructure was built in the post-World War II years and is 40 to 50 years old. As our population and economy have grown and prospered, so has our use of our infrastructure, often taxing it with levels of traffic unanticipated at the time of construction. Much of it is simply worn out.

These bills come due at an especially inopportune time. The high cost of fuel is causing Americans to drive less, down 3.7 percent in May of 2008 from May of 2007. Less fuel sold means lower federal and state fuel tax receipts, \$0.184 per gallon in federal taxes and \$0.30 per gallon in Rhode Island, the third-highest fuel tax in the country. (South Carolina's is \$0.16 per gallon and New Hampshire's is \$0.18.)

The federal highway trust fund is insufficient to meet all current needs for infrastructure, and the costs of asphalt and other construction materials are rising faster than the rate of inflation.

The result is that we are in a funding squeeze, and these bonds are the only practical way to relieve the pressure. They will earn five times as much in federal matching funds as the debt they will incur.

For these reasons, we urge all voters to locate Referendum 1 on Election Day and vote "Approve."